American Cultural History: Selected Topics
Material Culture and Consumer Culture

COURSE GUIDE

History 546          Spring 2007
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Scope of the Course

This course is designed as an advanced reading seminar focusing on the critical perspectives and methods of historians who study American cultural history. The course is designed with two basic goals in mind: 1. To introduce you to the interdisciplinary practice of cultural history, and 2. To explore key periods in the development of American culture from the colonial era to the early twentieth century. The central theme of the course this semester is "material culture and consumer culture." We will explore the evolution of consumer culture in the United States from the so-called “consumer revolution” of the eighteenth century through the development of a mass consumer society in the twentieth century. We will pay particular attention to the contributions of material culture scholars for our understanding of the social and political dynamics that have shaped consumer culture in American history.
Learning Objectives

By the end of the semester students should be able to demonstrate knowledge and skill development in the following areas.

- Explain distinctive periods in the development of American consumer culture from the eighteenth through the twentieth century.
- Explain the political dynamics of American consumer culture in the context of a capitalist democracy over time.
- Explain how objects have functioned in the cultural construction of race, class, and gender.
- Understand and evaluate a variety of methods for using visual (objects, photographs, art, etc.) as well as text-based sources as historical evidence.
- Synthesize central arguments of each reading assignment and evaluate major points of agreement or disagreement among particular authors as the course unfolds.

Required Readings

**Books:** (available at UNCG Bookstore and on reserve in Jackson Library)


**Journal Articles and Book Chapters:** (available on ereserves, JSTOR, or other journal databases. Use Journal Finder to locate articles not posted on ereserves.)


Robin D. G. Kelley, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Folk,’” pp. 1400-1408
Natalie Zemon Davis, “Toward Mixtures and Margins,” pp. 1409-1416
T. J. Jackson Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture,” pp. 1417-1426

**Evaluation**

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**Attendance Policy**

Faithful attendance is essential for your learning in this course. Therefore, beyond the part attendance plays in the overall participation grade, **there will be a 3% reduction of the student's final grade for each absence after the first 2.** Beyond even this penalty, a student who seriously neglects attendance and preparation risks failing the course.

**Participation (10%)**

This assessment will be based on three criteria:

1. **Consistent attendance**—This is a seminar, not a traditional lecture course. We will be critically evaluating the content of the readings and practicing the application of analytical skills during each class period. You will not be able to make up for your absences by copying someone else's notes. For this reason, consistent attendance is essential to your learning in this course.

2. **Thorough preparation** for class—readings must be completed before class and assignments must be turned in on time. Late assignments will be penalized by a 3% reduction in the final grade for every day the assignment is late. Assignments later than one week will not be accepted for credit. It is very important that you make arrangements with me in advance of the due date if you will not be able to meet an assignment deadline in the course.

3. **Regular contributions to class discussions**—the success of this course for your learning depends on active intellectual engagement with your peers. Discussions will take place during every class meeting in both small group exercises and as a whole class and you will have opportunities throughout the semester to develop your oral communication skills.

**Midterm (30%, due 2 March)**

**Undergraduate Students:** A set of essay questions will be distributed well in advance of the due date. Tests should be typed, about 7-10 pages double-spaced, with appropriate citations in Turabian style [http://library.uncg.edu/depts/ref/handouts/turabian.html]. You will submit your written assignments electronically to my email address. Late assignments will be penalized by a
3% reduction in the final grade for every day the assignment is late. Assignments later than one week will not be accepted for credit. It is very important that you make arrangements with me in advance of the due date if you will not be able to meet an assignment deadline in the course.

**Graduate Students:** A set of essay questions will be distributed well in advance of the due date. Tests should be typed, about 10-12 pages double-spaced, with appropriate citations in Turabian style [http://library.uncg.edu/depts/ref/handouts/turabian.html](http://library.uncg.edu/depts/ref/handouts/turabian.html). You will submit your written assignments electronically to my email address. Late assignments will be penalized by a 3% reduction in the final grade for every day the assignment is late. Assignments later than one week will not be accepted for credit. It is very important that you make arrangements with me in advance of the due date if you will not be able to meet an assignment deadline in the course.

**Book Review/Review Essay (30%)**
We will use as our class standard the book review guidelines for the American Studies journal, *American Quarterly* ([http://www.americanquarterly.org/index.php/about/book_reviews](http://www.americanquarterly.org/index.php/about/book_reviews)). These guidelines have also been posted to Blackboard. Reviews are due by 5:00 pm on the Friday in the same week as the class discussion of the book is scheduled.

Review due dates:
- Lovell, 2 Feb.
- Bushman, 16 February
- Grier, 23 February
- Domosh, 2 March
- Hunter, 16 March
- Cohen, 13 April
- Spigel, 20 April

**Undergraduate Students:** Follow the *American Quarterly* standard for a review of a single book (2500-3000 words). You will sign up to review one of the assigned books. Your review should take into account the professional evaluations of at least two different scholars (if possible) in published reviews of the book. You will summarize your evaluation of the book for class discussion on the date the book is assigned.

**Graduate Students:** Follow the *American Quarterly* standard for a review of multiple books (no more than 5000 words). You will sign up to review one of the assigned books. In addition to the assigned reading, your review should evaluate two additional books on a related theme or subject. Your review should take into account the professional evaluations of at least two different scholars (if possible) in published reviews of the books. You will summarize your evaluation of the book for class discussion on the date the book is assigned.
**Primary Source Analysis: Twentieth-Century Consumer Magazines (30%, due 25 April)**

**Undergraduate Students**: Select one issue of one of the popular consumer magazines listed below and evaluate the content of the issue using arguments of at least **three** different assigned readings to put the source in appropriate historical context. Be sure to evaluate visual content as well as text. You may focus on any decade of the twentieth century before 1970. 7-10 pages typed, double-spaced, with appropriate Turabian style footnotes and bibliography.

**Graduate Students**: Compare and contrast two different issues of the popular consumer magazines listed below. You may compare any two issues, but be sure to state your research goal. For example, you may select two different magazines from the same year to compare advertising strategies and target audience; or compare the issues from the same magazine over time (1920 vs. 1955, for example) to evaluate changes in mid-twentieth-century consumer culture. Use at least **five** different assigned readings to put the source in appropriate historical context. Also, explicitly consider theoretical and methodological frameworks explored in assigned readings that are useful for evaluating the content of the source as historical evidence. 10-15 pages, typed, double-spaced, with appropriate Turabian-style footnotes and bibliography.

Here is a list of approved popular consumer magazines of the twentieth century. If you would like to use a magazine that is not on this list, you should get my approval well in advance of the due date for this assignment.

*Ladies’ Home Journal* (AP2 .L135 [v.1-9 on Film 3570], holdings start in 1890)

*Better Homes and Gardens* (NA7100 .B45 [v.2-4 on Film 1562] holdings start in 1924)

*Good Housekeeping* (TX1 .G7, holdings start in 1916)

*Saturday Evening Post* (Microfilm--Main 2nd Floor-- Film 853, holdings start in 1919)

*Life* magazine (AP2 .L547, 1936-1972)

*Ebony* (Microfilm--Main 2nd Floor-- Film 2266, holdings start in 1957)

*Opportunity* (E185.5 .O6 1, 1923-1949)

*Crisis* (E185.5.C92, holdings start in 1922)

*House and Garden* (NA7100 .H6 1 holdings start in 1901)

*House Beautiful* (NA7100 .H65, holdings start in 1897)

*Vogue* (Microfilm--Main 2nd Floor-- Film 2384, holdings start in 1937)

*Harper’s Bazaar* (TT500 .H3, holdings start in 1934)
Course Schedule

January 10  Introductions

January 17  Consumer Revolution
Read:
Bushman, Gentility, 1700-1790

January 24  Theoretical Frameworks: Consumerism and Material Culture
Read:

January 31  Artisans and Consumers: the Politics of Consumption in the Revolutionary Era
Read:

February 2  Lovell Review due. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu by 5:00 p.m.

February 7  Households and Stores: Spaces of Consumption
Read:
February 14  Antebellum contexts: Consumption and the Cultural Construction of Race
Read:
Bushman, Respectability, 1790-1850

February 16  Bushman review due. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu by 5:00 pm.

February 21  Parlor and Department Store: Spaces and Symbols of Consumption in Victorian America
Read:

February 23  Grier review due. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu by 5:00 pm.

February 28  Consumerism as Imperialism
Read:

March 2  Midterm due. Domosh review due. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu by 5:00 pm.

March 7  Spring Break

March 14  Regional Contexts: Workers, Consumers, and Race in the New South
Read:

March 16  Hunter review due. Email to lctolber@uncg.edu by 5:00 pm.

March 21  Segregated Consumption
Read:


March 28      no class

April 4       Problems of Studying Consumers in Mass Industrial Contexts
Read:
  Robin D. G. Kelley, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘The Folk.’” pp. 1400-1408
  Natalie Zemon Davis, “Toward Mixtures and Margins,” pp. 1409-1416
  T. J. Jackson Lears, “Making Fun of Popular Culture,” pp. 1417-1426

April 11      Constructing a Mass Consumer Society in the Post-WWII era
Read:


April 13      Cohen review due. Email to lectolber@uncg.edu by 5:00 pm.

April 18      Material Culture, Media, and Mass Consumption in the Postwar Suburbs
Read:

April 20      Spigel review due. Email to lectolber@uncg.edu by 5:00 pm.

April 25      Primary Source Analysis due. Research reports and course evaluations.